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ABSTRACT

Two literacy programs based at the State University of New York, College at Brockport (SUNY-Brockport) universities have achieved some success, but both programs have changed, for various reasons. University students have much to gain from their involvement in literacy programs, including the satisfaction of helping others, the opportunity to learn about the institutions and organizations in which the literacy programs are situated, and identification of academic and career paths they might not have otherwise considered. The Promote Yourself Career Development Program was developed and supported through federal funds. Literacy help provided to members of two labor unions representing maintenance, clerical, and food service workers ranged from basic skills for job retention to advanced skills for career advancement. Participants met with tutors on a one-to-one basis at times convenient for both. Federal funds were eliminated and the program ended. The second program, the Student Literacy Corps, reached out into the surrounding community to provide literacy instruction. University student tutors worked within the structure of existing literacy programs and earned three credits in experiential education. Most students tutored more than the required 60 hours, and some exceeded 100 hours. The Student Literacy Corps now serves few adults--most of the tutoring is done with children in elementary school. (RS)

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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AS LITERACY TUTORS

a paper presented at the 17th World Congress of the International Reading Association

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This paper will focus on programs that use university students as literacy tutors. I shall describe two such literacy programs that have achieved some success. Yet neither program is now what it had been--for various reasons.

University Students

Before discussing either of the specific programs, I would like to speak more generally about the mutual benefits of university students as literacy tutors. The university students have much to offer a literacy program, and at the same time, they have much to gain from their involvement.

In the United States, an estimated 45 million adults are functionally illiterate. The need for instruction--and instructors--is great, and can be partially met by tapping the resource of current university students. They possess the enthusiasm of youth and are adept at learning new techniques and procedures. In addition, many university students have a commitment to social improvement and are determined to "make a difference" in the world.

There are also values for the university student. First among these values might be the satisfaction of helping others. This is often a new and richly rewarding experience for first-time tutors. In addition, the students have the opportunity to learn about the institutions and organizations in which the literacy programs are situated, e.g. public school continuing education programs, social service agencies, and correctional facilities. The students learn by

direct participation. This type of experiential learning has a widely recognized record of success at elementary and secondary levels, but is underutilized at the tertiary level. Finally, university students may find their tutoring experiences helpful in identifying academic and career paths they might not otherwise have considered. Several students have decided to study for teacher certification. One student, who was planning a career in law, determined that she would focus her studies on advocacy for those who are marginalized on our society.

As I move to a description of the two literacy programs, let me provide some brief information about the university at which the programs operated. The State University of New York, College at Brockport (SUNY-Brockport) is one of several arts and sciences colleges in the New York State system. It is located in a generally rural area of western New York State, fifteen miles west of the city of Rochester. Programs of study are available in both the liberal arts and the professions. At this time there are approximately 7000 undergraduate students and 2000 graduate students enrolled.

Promote Yourself Career Development Program

In the late 1980's, it became evident at SUNY-Brockport that illiteracy was a problem among workers on the campus. Many were having difficulty complying with a newly-enacted state mandate that required more advanced driver's license for their work. At the same time, the federal government was

making available funds under the National Workplace Literacy Program. The Promote Yourself Career Development Program was developed and supported at Brockport through their federal funds. It became a partnership between the university and the two labor unions representing maintenance, clerical and food service workers. Literacy help provided to the participants ranged from basic skills for job retention to advanced skills for career advancement.

Tutors

Tutors were recruited from the college's undergraduate and graduate classes. They represented a broad diversity of academic interests, with the most common majors being Education and Social Work. Tutors were paid $5.50 an hour through the grant and were expected to tutor between 3 and 5 hours a week.

Tutors were trained individually or in small groups by the program coordinator who also served as their mentor throughout the tutoring period. The initial 16 hour training included the following topics:

-sensitivity to the needs of adult learners

-reading methodology

-goal-setting and lesson plans

-assessment

-record-keeping and program management

As a workplace literacy program, both the goals and the materials were drawn from the workday situations of the participants. A **functional job analysis** was conducted by the Program Coordinator resulting in a list of skills necessary to perform a given job effectively. The job analysis involved job shadowing and examination of source documents, e.g. work orders, signs, labels, recipes, warning signs, and equipment manuals.

Program Recruitment

Workers were introduced to the Promote Yourself program during one of their regularly scheduled mandatory workshops focusing on topics such as health, safety, career advancement. The program coordinator and union representatives described the organization and the benefits of the program. All workshops included a reading and writing component to identify workers experiencing with literacy skills. Later some workers who had become successfully involved in the program were enlisted to help recruit others.

Finally, the "grapevine" proved to be a successful recruiting source.

Program

Participants met with tutors on a one-to-one basis at various quiet locations around campus, meeting at times that were convenient for both the tutor and the participant. Sometimes this meant one o'clock in the morning, when the

worker was just finishing a shift. In fact one of the attractions of the program was that participants received paid released time on a half-time basis. Usually they would begin their instructional hour during the last thirty minutes of their shift and then continue on for another 30 minutes on their own time.

Meeting Barriers to Successfully Completing Literacy Training

Attempts to improved adult literacy face a common set of difficulties. This program was designed to overcome some of these difficulties. Many adults, who may be motivated to improve their literacy, find that instruction is not available for them or that they would have to travel long distances to reach a literacy class. Since the Promote Yourself program was situated right at the workplace, availability was not a problem. Another concern of many adults is care for their children during the literacy instruction. Promote Yourself provided free, on-campus child care to meet this concern. Many adults feel self-conscious about their difficulties with reading and writing. The one-to-one format allowed for private instruction with no co-workers present. In addition, a conscious effort was made to put the learners at ease. Both their supervisors and their union representatives endorsed the plan and emphasized its value in job advancement. In order to avoid the perception that the program was only for those with very low skills, instruction was also offered to those with advanced literacy

skills who were preparing to undertake college-level study. Computer literacy was another area that had a wide appeal to the workers and carried a positive image.

Unfortunately, federal funds for the program were eliminated in 1994 and the program was ended. The primary expenses that could no longer be covered included salaries for a full time director and part time secretary as well as the hourly wages paid to each tutor.

STUDENT LITERACY CORPS

The second program for adult literacy is known as the Student Literacy Corps. It also was initiated through the support of a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Unlike Promote Yourself, the student Literacy Corps was intended to reach out into the surrounding community to provide literacy instruction. College students again provided instruction after a period of training.

Who were the recipients of the literacy training? In contrast to the Promote Yourself program, Student literacy Corps delivered instruction to off-campus locations and to adults other than college employees. Instruction took place in a number of different settings, e.g. municipal libraries, migrant farm worker camps, church halls, community centers, and prison classrooms.

In each case, the tutor worked within the structure of an existing literacy program. Several programs sponsored by state and county agencies served populations of disabled and/or unemployed individuals. A federal program for migrant works and their families had existed in the area for over twenty years. These programs provided basic skills instruction as well as English as a Second Language, and preparation for high school equivalency diplomas (GED). The prison was a women's correctional facility and addressed some of the same literacy needs.

What about students who provided the literacy instruction? As with Promote Yourself, they represented a wide variety of academic majors with Education and Social Work again being most common. Several Criminal Justice majors were attracted to the program for the opportunity to work in a correctional facility.

In contrast to the Promote Yourself program, these students did not tutor for pay. However they were able to earn three credit hours in experiential education.

Initial preparation for tutoring took the form of the Literacy Volunteers of America basic training course for tutors. This involved four 5-hour sessions at the beginning of each college term. In addition, a weekly class meeting was held each Friday afternoon. This was a time to reinforce LVA instruction, introduce new topics, and give students a chance to "compare notes" with tutors in different

placements. Students were expected to complete at least 60 contact hours of tutoring which averaged about 5 hours a week.

The tutors worked within literacy programs that were already established and were led by a full time teacher. For instance, a tutor might join a team of 2-3 instructors working on a Family Literacy project at a migrant camp. Adults would receive literacy instruction while their pre-school children were engaged in activities to foster language development. The session would culminate with adults and children coming together--often the parents would lead a language activity with their children.

Another example would be the tutor who works with a community action project established to help high school drop-outs pass an equivalency exam. Meeting at a public library twice a week, the tutor would be available to "trouble-shoot" among the seven young adults as needed. At the same time, the tutor might work in a more systematic there might be another student with whom the tutor has developed a more continuous relationship.

Most students tutored more than the required 60 hours, and some exceeded 100 hours. This took a great deal of schedule planning. Not only did they have to work around their traditional college class schedules, but they also had to consider the time constraints at their tutoring sites since they were working within existing literacy programs. For instance, migrant programs were limited to the evening,

after the day's farm work was completed. The correctional facility had understandable security concerns which meant that tutors arriving even two minutes late would not be allowed to enter the educational unit--and once there, no one would be allowed to leave early.

However, while the Student Literacy Corps still exists, it is not in the same form today. Very few adults are served--most of the tutoring is done with children in elementary school. The shift has occurred as a greater number of students became interested in exploring the career field of elementary school teaching. In addition, admission to the SUNY-Brockport elementary teacher certification program requires students to show evidence of work with children in an organized program. The Student Literacy Corps provides a readily available way to do this.

Thus, we have had two programs that served the need for literacy instruction among adults. Each had been successful in its own way and had characteristics that might be adopted in future programs, yet neither is today what it had been at one time.